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HOW TO HIDE FROM EXISTENCE

Review of: Dennis Broeders (2009) *Breaking Down Anonymity. Digital Surveillance of Irregular Migrants in Germany and the Netherlands*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 230 p.

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The aim of *Breaking Down Anonymity* is to provide a nuanced, policy-informed picture of recent developments in governmental responses to the issue of irregular, i.e. unauthorized, migration. Given the fact that this issue is a good candidate for being one of the most controversial and talked-about topics in both academic and public circles, the explicitly moderate empirical approach is praiseworthy in itself. Moreover, Broeders' commitment to data and statistics seems intended to resist the tendency to think of such issues as state sovereignty, transnational government, surveillance technologies and migration as somehow independent from the concrete policies, practices and sites in which they are taking shape. This, perhaps, can in this case be captured by noticing that Broeders' affiliation is not with philosophy, but rather with surveillance and migration studies, a burgeoning field investigating how modern technologies and expertise have influenced the policies regulating irregular migration. This approach is reflected in the central research questions for his study, namely that of the relation between, on the one hand, the role of systems of information and surveillance in policies of control and,

on the other hand, the aim of exclusion focused on identification and expulsion in addition to the established policies of societal exclusion (17).

Broeders begins with observing that from the midst of the 1990's on, European governments have increasingly turned themselves to internal control measures to stop irregular migration. That is to say that not the controlling of the physical borders, but rather that of guarding societal institutions by means of identification and control became central. This approach gave rise to such metaphors as 'Fortress Europe', which heavily influenced the public and political opinion and response to the nation state and the European Union as well as to the irregular migrant herself. The altered policy aims and means marked the transition from the physical control of borders to the importance of information, expertise and knowledge. Despite political determination and vast resources, European countries, nevertheless, turned out to be unable to bridge the gap between official immigrant policies and actual policy outcomes.

One of the reasons for this has been that internal control measures – such as the exclusion from public institutions and the labor market – and the related aim to discourage the irregular migrant's stay, leave open the question of how to permanently expel the migrant. According to Broeders, some governments have recently shown the intention to take their approach a step further by looking for ways to make ultimate expulsion possible and more effective. The distinction between these two governmental 'logics of exclusion' is crucial for Broeders' argument: Where the first merely aims at labeling the migrant as 'not belonging' – 'exclusion *from* documentation' – the second focuses on full-fledged identification of the individual – 'exclusion *through* documentation'. It is important to note that these two logics are to make radically different demands on the way governments make use of digital surveillance systems, knowledge and databases. The determination and substantiating of this difference is a litmus test for Broeders' claim that the second logic of 'exclusion through documentation' is expected to become abundant in European countries. That is, while Broeders has to establish both logics in full to make explicit the gradual transition from the first to the second logic, his main aim is to investigate the possible future for the using of digital surveillance as an instrument of identification and, successively, identification as a means to

exclusion. To support this hypothesis, Broeders analyzes and compares recent developments in Germany and the Netherlands with regard to, firstly, their policies on public institutions and labor market controls and, secondly, detention and expulsion practices. Broeders presents his definition of these two countries as ‘most likely’ to show a transition from the first to the second logic mainly on the basis of similarities in political, economic and bureaucratic climate. Yet, the trouble with this is that, in the end, Broeders uses the two countries as evidence – and compares them with each other on the basis – of a logic that does *not yet* exist; in other words, they could fail to prove what they themselves are expected to make manifest.

In the second chapter Broeders provides a detailed historical account of the changing nature and conception of borders in European countries. Explicitly conceptualizing metaphors as influencing the practical organization of political and public imagination, Broeders deals with both the idea of a ‘Fortress Europe’, a ‘Panopticum Europe’ and the ‘surveillance state’. Where Broeders dismisses the first for being too politically tendentious – this image is merely proposed by those who explicitly oppose it – he accuses the second of not being able to adapt itself to the fact that ‘the objects of surveillance are mobile [...] Surveillance is used for social sorting, rather than controlling the socially sorted [and its aim] is exclusion rather than correction’ (34). To be sure, (digital) surveillance – as the control on legitimate movement and a tool to divide the ‘ins’ from ‘outs’ – is common to both logics of exclusion. The difference, here, is in the details of intention. Where surveillance optimization by, for instance, computerization and interconnectivity of databases facilitates the state to execute the exclusion from documentation more easily, they also make possible the ‘progressive disappearance of disappearance’; the goal of breaking down the anonymity of the individual irregular migrant. As Broeders lucidly shows, the paradox connected to the second logic is striking, since the increasing focus on the identity of the irregular migrant has less and less to do with the individual, up to the point that identification does not even *need* the individual (Broeders calls this ‘double depersonalization’); the computer dictates and biometrical data determines. It is praiseworthy that Broeders, at this point in the book, avoids considering these latter techniques as being technical devices that can, as Barry put it, ‘somehow

work autonomously of [their] multiple connections with other (human and non-human) elements’, that is, in isolation and not in need of subsequent ‘knowledge, skill, diagrams, charts, calculations and energy which make [their] use possible’ (Barry 2002: 9). Following Scott, Broeders shows that the most important opportunity of protest is that of ‘silent’ individual resistance in the form of the manipulation of personal identity (see Scott 1985). For instance, the adoption of a false identity or the obliteration of establishing or concealing a legal identity can, relatively easily, render these (digital and biometric) governmental techniques less powerful.¹

As chapter three makes clear, guarding access to the labor market by means of documentation and registration emphasizes the *similarities and differences* between the two logics. Although both make use of, for instance, documentation, paperwork, registration, forms and documents, where the first logic uses these to block access to all the institutions the irregular migrant needs or wants to gain entry to, the second logic deploys this documentation and knowledge to investigate and verify the status and identity of the individual migrant. Despite being Broeders’ main topic of research, the difference between the two logics – although intuitive – is sometimes hard to pinpoint. For instance, where Broeders in the first chapter has explicitly emphasized the radically different demands both logics ask of bureaucratic organization, he later on – in chapter four – will remark that they require ‘[r]oughly the same infrastructure’ and that their difference lies in ‘a shift of goals, methods and procedures, rather than means’ (97). Moreover, observing that the Netherlands and Germany both manifest a – rather ineffective – intensification of policies aimed at blocking access to the labor market and a more reserved trend towards the second logic, at least in chapter three, seems to be more an observation of general policy tendencies and political aims than of a statistical indication of a development towards the intensifying use of (digital) surveillance. That is, the fact that the available data is ‘foggy’, ‘missing’ or ‘not-registered’ is not the only problematic aspect at this point in the book. It is rather that of a clear analytical divide between the two logics: Are they to be expected on the level of policy *means* or policy *aims*?

Chapter four is, perhaps, providing a way out, for it emphasizes the increasing use of police surveillance and detention as techniques specific to the second logic of exclusion. That is, in recent years, governments have increasingly concerned themselves with ‘techniques to identify, classify and manage groupings sorted by dangerousness’ – for instance in the form of policing, detention and imprisonment – which are embodied in ‘factories of exclusion in which people are habituated to their status of the excluded’ (117). In these cases irregular migrants are ‘dealt with’ in terms of controlling a, possibly, ‘dangerous underclass’ that is only protected by human, and certain procedural, rights. This straightforward criminological vocabulary is, as Broeders remarks, strange in itself, since, for instance in the Netherlands, irregular residence is not recognized as a criminal offence. But, here again, the question is whether we are dealing with the first logic of exclusion – which, in this instance, not only means shutting off access to societal institutions, but to society as a whole – or the second, which would consist of detention centers functioning as ‘factories of identification’ in which all measures are taken that serve identification and documentation of the irregular migrant. The crucial issue deciding between the two is whether immigrant detention has resulted in an increase of effective expulsion. Since determining the migrant’s identity has shown to be both extremely difficult and costly – lack of cooperation and active obstruction from the side of the irregular migrant and the refusal of countries of origin to cooperate has resulted in a cost of, approximately, 35.000 euro per successful expulsion – the intensification of expulsion policies through detention centers seems to be introduced more as a measure of public safety, than of immigration policy. That is, both the Netherlands and Germany are investing in modern surveillance techniques that make it possible to skip the immigrant herself for identification, but ‘both in terms of human and economic costs, [this] seems a high price to pay for an unknown and immeasurable contribution to the effectiveness of expulsion policies’ (151). A possible way, then, for countries to begin developing an effective second logic of exclusion seems to be to take identification to a European policy level.

Nations have ‘gone European’ to achieve what they could not achieve; in part, they could not achieve their goals because the scale of the problem had become truly European (common external borders and visa policy)

and so the solution had to be found there as well.’ (181) To put it more frankly – as Broeders himself does – the European Union has proved to be a laboratory for national governments to experiment with new initiatives and instruments (e.g. DNA profiles, iris scans, international network of information databases) that are not ‘hindered’ by democratic or public scrutiny. It is both remarkable and troublesome that *this* level of migration policy *does* make manifest a turn to the second logic of exclusion. Systems such as the Schengen Information System (SIS I/II) – which alone contains almost seventeen million entries with (biometric) information on, especially, irregular migrants – directly aim at confirming the migrants ‘irregular’ status and re-connecting her to her legal identity. As, among others, Walters has pointed out, these upcoming practices of control and surveillance at the level of the European border manifest a ‘double displacement’; they move away from the physical borders and they are carried out by non-state organizations such as medical offices and security companies (Walters 2004). Moreover, the specific techniques deployed do not seem to be fully reliable, could cause stigmatization and lack a sufficient political framework (e.g. Dijstelbloem 2009, Mitchell 2006, Trenz 2004). The second logic, when taken to its current most extreme form, thus seems to reinforce some profound *political* discussions and controversy.

In the end, Broeders’ approach – despite its modesty – turns out to be risky. As said, this modesty resides in his investigating how and to what extent an ‘old’ political priority is translated into ‘new’ policies on technologies of surveillance and control. The fact that this translation cannot always be substantiated, however – the numbers are not gathered or calculated – makes the practices and tendencies Broeders’ study merely indicates, ‘implode’, so to say; the changing character of the national and European border (e.g. Walters 2006; Balibar 2009), issues of (transnational and/or European) citizenship (e.g. Kastoryano 2005), the commercialization of identity related to technologies of control, the ideas of personhood, identity and the assumption that ‘the body does not lie’ in biometric surveillance techniques (e.g. Dijstelbloem et.al 2009; Aas 2006), are left untouched. In a sense, this is both the primary strength and weakness of *Breaking Down Anonymity*, since – rephrasing Stengers – Broeders’ research does not pretend to be able to refer to itself as having the power to

prove what follows from the problems it creates (Stengers 2010: 60). Where one would, perhaps, expect a disapproval of, or a critical engagement with, the political transition from 'blocking access' to 'identification and expulsion', Broeders provides a profound investigation of a possible future. It is up to others to deal with this in the present.

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¹ See the devastating movie *Illégal* – Belgium's official submission for Best Foreign Language Film Oscar – for an example of the crucial importance of personal (i.e. either legal or biological) information for the possibility of expulsion. The individual resistance, here, is captured by the fact that government's officials cannot check the main character's fingerprints, because she – a middle-aged women from Belarus – burned her fingertips, figuring that she cannot be sent back home if authorities do not know who she is. See: Masset-Depasse 2010.